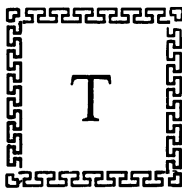


FREUD'S INFLUENCE IN CONTEMPORARY CULTURE*

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T
 HERE is an implied pretentiousness in the title of my paper which I am impelled to disavow. To treat amply of Freud's influence on contemporary culture one would need to possess both an encyclopedic intelligence—and, endless time. *You know* that I have not endless time, and *I* can assure you, that I do not have an encyclopedic intelligence. In 1936, when Freud's eightieth birthday was celebrated, Thomas Mann was called on to treat of a simpler theme, namely, Freud's influence on literature. Thomas Mann discharged his obligation in a singular and novel way. Thomas Mann spoke about Thomas Mann. He did this both deliberately and apologetically—saying to his audience—“Perhaps you will kindly permit me to continue for a while in this autobiographical strain, and not take it amiss if instead of speaking of Freud I speak of myself.”**

For a while I thought of using the same dodge, but then realized I couldn't get away with it. For while Mann could be identified with, indeed impersonate, Literature, I could hardly impersonate Culture—with a capital C. I did, however, resolve my dilemma in the sensible resolution to talk *about* rather than *on* Freud and contemporary culture. That shrinks my commitments to the dimensions of my competences.

Initially I must define the sense in which I intend to treat of culture, and more precisely also the meaning of “influence.” Culture is that field wherein the anthropologists, and after them the sociologists, have the greatest fun—waging, like the knights in Valhalla, their daily and unending semantic and ideological battles. I for one have no intention to enter their lists. Even though the restriction is arbitrary I intend to treat of culture as the embodiment of the hopes, faiths, beliefs, convictions, and

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**Mann, T. *Freud, Goethe, Wagner*. New York, A. A. Knopf, 1937, p. 12.

aspirations which give distinction to the realms and ages of man. And I will not deal with culture in the abstract, but rather in particular, with those media wherein and whereby culture, so defined, is preserved and transmitted, and wherein its creativity is witnessed. You perceive that I am as wordy as the proverbial sociologist. What I intend to touch on is literature, the drama, some portion of the graphic arts, the vernaculars in general, and, to top it off, Existentialism. This, too, may seem pretentious, but let it not discourage you.

I must also define the meaning of "influence." It is not my intention to delineate Freud's direct influence on any given medium or on any creative artists. It is my plan, rather, to show how greatly Freud's theories, and his labors, were effective in the creation of a pervading climate of opinion, of an embracing atmosphere of comprehension and insight, so that none that "drew breath" could escape being affected, in one way or another.

But to judge of this we must orient ourselves to some starting point, and I would select for simplicity the medium of the novel, in the time of the Romantic period.

The Romantic period followed on that of the French Revolution. It embraces essentially the last decades of the eighteenth, and the first half of the nineteenth century. The novels of this period have certain distinctive features—but the term Romantic does not describe them. Indeed, they were not romantic in the original sense of that term—that is they were not fancied extravaganzas represented, say in the *Chanson de Roland*, in the Arthurian Tales, or in Ariosto's *Orlando Furioso*. These were tales rich in fancy, ingenious in plot, and counter-plot, and peopled with characters to which neither life nor experience affords a counterpart. They were magnificent creations—in the pure and uninhibited exercise of fancy. They were, in the pristine sense Romances, and so labeled. For the term romantic means: "extravagantly ideal, sentimental rather than rational; fanciful and visionary." The Romances, in a word, had no relation to life as it is experienced. Now the novels of the Romantic Period were not of this order. They embellished but they did not violate reality. Their heroes and heroines—Goethe's Werther, for example, and Schlegel's Lucinde—were not at all ethereal, but rather earth-earthy. Their experiences and adventures were such as do not commonly, yet might perchance, fall to the lot of the common man. Furthermore the writers of these novels were sustained by a faith

in the transcending meaningfulness of life. That above everything else distinguishes the novel of the Romantic Period, and for that reason the period were better named—the Transcendentalist Period.

This transcendentalism was, in a measure, pantheistic. It glorified nature and the natural. In that respect it was anti-classical, for the classical was artificial rather than natural. Rousseau is counted among the initiators of Romanticism. His *Nouvelle Héloïse*, his *Emile*, and his *Contrat Social* represented, as Ford Madox Ford describes them, "a general revolt against the stifling conventions of the classicism of the eighteenth century."* But the transcendentalism which animated the Romantic Period was more than a movement of protest, and vastly more than the roseate, Arcadian *Schwärmerei*, which it is commonly represented to have been. It had its dreams to dream, but also its lessons to teach. For if life is meaningful, then its meaning must; like a correct equation, tally in either direction: or, to paraphrase it in its Greek equivalent—Character and Destiny must be two components in reality which bear a reversible relationship.

It were too much, perhaps, to claim for Romantic Literature, the fathomed grasp and the conscious exposition of this idea, yet it would not be, did we include in the ambient of literature not only the novel, but also poetry, the drama, and philosophy. Goethe's *Faust*, and particularly in its first part, is essentially an effulgent essay on Character and Destiny. But I feel more safe with the more modest claim. The Romantic Period, as mirrored in its novels was naturalistic in the Rousseauist sense, that is, both realistic and romantic. Having withdrawn from the heroic and the palatial, the novelist could observe and treat of "life as is." This treatment of life is better witnessed in the Romantic writers of the non-Germanic countries: in the novels of Hawthorne, and Herman Melville, in Lermontov's, *A Hero of Our Times*, and in the novels of Stendhal and Flaubert.

It is among these authors that we first encounter the so-called psychological novel. Stendhal is credited with having initiated this order of novel with his *Le Rouge et le Noir* of 1831. But this, as most firsts, is simply the artifact of chronology. I mean, he did not originate the variety. Lermontov's epic appeared in 1836; Pushkin, counted a poet rather than a novelist, wrote *Eugeni Oneigin* in 1822-1829. Hawthorne's *Scarlet Letter* appeared in 1850 and Melville's *Moby Dick* in

* Ford, F. M. *March of literature*. New York, Dial Press, 1938, p. 541.

1851. Each of these is preeminently a "psychological novel." Yet the point I want to make bears not on Stendhal's primacy. It is rather this: that as soon as the literary genius earnestly turns his competences to the perception, study, and description of man and his destinies, he must performe psychologize.

In this connection it is of interest to note how many psychiatrists, notably psychoanalysts, have found among the authors of the Romantic Period, writers whom they relish to dub pre-Freudian. Thus much has been made of Hawthorne's *Scarlet Letter* and Oliver Wendell Holmes' *Elsie Venner*. These are in effect significant psychological novels, but they were not written in a clairvoyant anticipation of Freud and of psychoanalysis. Rather they were written in the spirit and the intelligence of their time. And the time itself was intensely preoccupied with psychology. Indeed, and I anticipate Gregory Zilboorg will have treated this more fully, there was more of the pre-Freudian psychology in the psychology of the Romantic period than is to be found in its ample literature of novels and plays. Singly — Carus, Schubert, von Hartman, names preeminent in the history of Romantic Medicine, anticipated many of the elements that are to be found in Freud's metapsychology. Yet I must add, such anticipation does not make them pre-Freudians. Count these others, if you will, magnificent workers. Freud, however, was the sole architect and builder of his psychoanalysis.

Be that as it may, I need to get on with the talk, and the fact is that the Romantic Period which eventuated as a protest against the classicism of the eighteenth century, itself experienced both protest and revolt, and came to an end circa 1850. It came to an inglorious end, and thereafter to be called a Romantic was tantamount to having suffered the worst of insulting disparagements.

Romanticism gave way to Realism. Not transcendentalism nor the ultimate meaningfulness of life, but the singular problems of singular individuals, the orphan, the factory child, the prostitute, the thief, the murderer, became the subject of the representative novel. The better known exponents of this school of Realism, in the English language, were Dickens, Thackeray, and Samuel Butler; in French literature, Emile Zola is the outstanding example, and among the Germans, Hermann Sudermann and Gerhart Hauptmann. Both the Scandinavian and the Russian writers are eminently represented in this school—Björnson, Strindberg, and Knut Hamsun come to mind among the Scandinavians,

and Turgenev, Dostoyevsky, Tolstoi, Chekov, Andreyev and Gorki among the Russians. This cluster of preeminent writers represents a broad spectrum of literary genius, and at first blush it may seem that they are too divergent, too singular, too distinctive in their respective creativity to be lumped under one category. In many respects, in literary style, for example, that is true indeed. And yet they do share in a common denominator. They treat of *problems* rather than of life transcendent. They are, if I be permitted to use the term, *typologists*. The problems they treat are those of social and economic adversity, of malignant heredity, of environmental stress, of political oppression, of personality defects. Their texts are not infrequently in the nature of social, economic, political, and cultural theses. Insofar as they *are* psychologists they mirror the effects upon the individual of poverty, ignorance, heredity, disease, social hypocrisy and repression. The Russian writers perhaps treat more deeply of the socio-psychological reticulum that ensnares the individual. Though I doubt that Thomas Hardy, for example, would be found wanting, in comparison say to Gorki, or Dostoyevsky. But be that as it may, *this* fact is as true of Hardy as it is of Gorki and the rest, that the psychology of the Realist school was *deterministic*. The determinants are largely, if not entirely, *extraneous to the character*, and of a socio, economic, environmental nature. The prostitute is such because she was betrayed, abandoned, poor, or otherwise corrupted. The thief is avenging himself on society. The murderer has been brought to despair and driven to violence. Not that these authors overlooked *character*. They have not! Neither Strindberg, nor Dostoyevsky, nor Gorki, had been so remiss. But *character* was deemed to be native. One was born with a given character, and the story invariably begins with that assumption.

In this respect the Realist writers were at one with the leading psychiatrists of their day—with Kraepelin, for example, and with Lombroso. Indeed they were in consonance with the emergent science of their age, which was in every respect, and in each department, belligerently deterministic. It was thus that the novel, and I might add, also the play, was *psychological in treatment, but not in insight*. Psychology mirrored experience, but did not illuminate it. There is a passage in Ford Madox Ford's *March of Literature* which I am moved to cite. It so well describes the deterministic psychology which animated the Realists. He is speaking of Dickens, Balzac, and Thackeray. "You always

know beforehand," he wrote,* "what Dickens will do with the fraudulent lawyer on whose machinations hang the fate of a score of his characters; you always know beforehand how Balzac will deal with the million-franc financial crises with which his pages are scattered; and you always know beforehand the sort of best-club comment that Thackeray in his own person will supply for every twenty pages or so of his characters' actions. There is no surprise." How could there be! Deterministic psychology, and determinism in general, *allow* for no surprises! It is thus that "given—a man has a cough, a hoarse voice, a black jowl and a wooden leg, not one of these novelists will let him take something to soften his voice, shave, or substitute a cork limb for the wooden peg that will stick out all over the story—ad nauseam." In brilliant contrast there is awakened in my memory the inspiring, the vivifying experience of Pirandello's *Six Characters in Search of an Author*, which I saw performed in my youth. There, as you may recall, the playwright who marshalled his characters, planning to manipulate them through his preconceived plot, finds himself taken over by the "characters." No less moving, as I recall it, was Sam Benelli's play, *The Jest*, in which both John and Lionel Barrymore shared the leading roles.

The dullness, the depressing aftermath of the Realist authors, both novelist and playwrights, are only now appreciable and comprehensible. They were not at the time when we were first exposed to them in our youth, or, as I might phrase it, in our pre-Freudian days. For they did arouse sympathy and passion, and we were persuaded that we were the witnesses of "life in the raw." Besides, their hearts were on the "right side," not anatomically—but for "liberty" and against "reaction," for "justice" and "goodness" against "evil and corruption." Hugo and Ibsen; Strindberg and Zola; Tolstoi and Gorki! They still retain much of their magic, and no doubt *will* for many generations to come. But the rigging of their art is now perceptible as it was not in the days of our youth. And, would it be too much to say that Freud helped to clear our vision, and to sharpen our perception? I think not! He was not alone in this, but he became, for us, the embodiment of all the rest, the representative, the *Praesidium*, of that cultural emergence which cannot be named otherwise than Freudian.

It is not an easy task to define this cultural turn, even though the

* Ford, F. M. *loc. cit.*; pp. 808-809.

evidence of its effects is all about us. No small portion of the difficulty derives from the condition that it is so diffusely profaned. If a book or a play, a poem or a painting, treats of incest, homosexuality, a fetishism, or of a manifestly neurotic subject, it is more than likely to be labelled Freudian. Even those books distinguished for nothing but their superabundance of four-letter words, are given this *affiche*, as if Freud invented pornography or opened the sluices of humanity's cloacal stream.

All this, however, is negative—it may clear the way for, but does not proffer, insight into the nature of the Freudian impact upon contemporary culture. The problem must be treated affirmatively: and that is perhaps best done through a series of affirmations stated categorically at first, and defended later. Thus—Freud challenged the prevailing philosophy of determinism. The emphasis here is on the term *prevailing*. For Freud too is a determinist, but his embrace of factors that “decide the issue,” extends far beyond that deemed acceptable by his contemporaries. Take for example the “irrational” factor. The positivists, among the scientists, philosophers and authors, allowed for no surprises. But Freud demonstrated that life is full of surprises, that dreams, for example, are meaningful, that slips and errors and forgetting are meaningful. Freud did not deny the validity of rationality or of logical deductions. He did, however, demonstrate that logicity is only one attribute of being and experience, and that the paradox is more native to man than is the syllogism.

His was not a system or a philosophy of the irrational, as some would make it out to be. He rather underscored the fact that the rational *does* embrace the irrational,—that so-called error is meaningful and hence pregnant with rationality. He did all this not by simply playing with ideas born out of intuition as did the Romantics, but forged his conclusions in the travail of scientific research, study, testing and retesting.

Freud was no philosopher. He disclaimed all competence in philosophy and disavowed it. It is rather *we* who interpret *him* philosophically. Freud did not perceive, as we *can*, his position in the stream of cultural eventuation. Freud charted the trans-uterine emergence of character. He plotted the shores and shoals, the Scylla and Charibdis, that man must pass ere he reaches the haven of effective maturity, and *the ultimate* in self-fulfilment. Character, in the Greek sense, Freud demonstrated, is only partly given, the rest is attained in the adventures of living. There

is a fatality that hangs over man, but, Freud proved, it is not implacable.

Freud was a psychiatrist, far more than he was a philosopher. Freud brought into our awareness the primal impulsions of life. In addition to the categories of time, place, and the immediacies of reality, there is a fourth category—that of life emergent. And it is the greater of the four, and oft prevails even *against* the rest. The Romantics knew all this, and so did the ancient Greeks before them. But the Greeks knew it deductively, and the Romantics intuitively. Freud, however, not merely affirmed all this, but demonstrated it. He helped make the blind to see and the lame to walk. And as a result, derivative rather than direct, *since* his day all of our thinking and feeling, and representation of life, have been changed. These operations have acquired a new dimension: the dimension, not only of extension but also of depth. That Freudian psychology is called Depth Psychology is very proper indeed.

I must try to make my meaning more clear. Freud came upon a world that was naively sober and earnest. Truth, it held, was truth, and fact—fact. Relationships were patent, or were to be made so. There was, in other words, no hindside, to truth, or fact, or relations. There they stood, stark naked and bold, for all that chose to see. Reality *was* reality, and neither ever was nor ever could be anything else. Reality for example could never be the symbolic, conventional representation of another reality standing behind it, which itself was but a symbol for something else, and so on ad infinitum. Everything was so very patent to the Victorians. Had not Herbert Spencer accounted for everything but the Unknowable? Nor was it otherwise in art, music, the drama, philosophy, philology, and so on. Not that everything was already known, but rather that the ways to knowledge had been amply mastered.

Into this all-too-cock-certain world Freud threw the bombshell of symbolism. Reality, he asserted, stood not monolithically by itself, but in a series of relatednesses, and was in effect but the latest symbolic representation of that relatedness. Dreams spoke in symbols, but so also do we, waking, for words have meaning and representations, far above and behind their explicit conveyance. So has art, and the drama. Things are not really *always* what they seem. They may be *that*, but commonly are *more beside*. Is it any wonder then that the Victorian world recoiled in horror? But fortunately not all of it. There were a few that also had heard the Siren song. They were not followers of Freud, at least

not in the beginning. They rather shared with him in this deeper vision of being and reality. The Impressionist painters come to mind; Verlaine and Baudelaire, the poets, and Schnitzler, the dramatist and novelist. There were others too—Nietzsche, for example, but I cannot catalogue them all. The cardinal point to be noted is that Freud, so to say, *structuralized* his deeper vision of being and reality, organized it and communicated it so that others might share in it. This, may I add, Freud accomplished not in his system of therapeutics, that is in his psychoanalysis, but rather in his system of Metapsychology. Because he so effectively structuralized his understanding of being and reality, it is preeminently proper to speak of *Freud's* influence on contemporary culture.

These influences are readily perceived in literature, that is in the novel, drama, in poetry, in literary criticism, in biography, and in autobiography. They are to be witnessed no less clearly but in different respects in the graphic arts, and in what I term the vernaculars.

Freud's Metapsychology (what I have called his deep vision of being and reality), deals with the full spectrum of life, with well-being no less than with illness, with the normal as well as with the abnormal. But Freud was initially a therapist, one who treated the sick. He drew insight from his experiences with the sick. He was a psychopathologist *before* he became a psychophysicologist. Literature, for all-too-obvious reasons, seized upon Freudian psychopathology, and made it its own domain. This is, of course, in the best traditions of Aristotelian poetics. But as a result—Freudian psychopathology is better known to the public than is his metapsychology. Since there is so much pathology within and about us, this may not be at all bad. Indeed it must profit us to recognize and to understand psychopathology—as and when we encounter it. And to this end literature has made and is making its notable contributions. It is my impression that the playwrights are preeminent in this field—possibly because plays are generally compounded of action—while in the novel the author can dally on the scenery and soliloquize. But the contemporary novels and plays alike reflect the influence of Freud. They are not merely psychological as are those of Stendhal, that is psychologically descriptive—they are rather analytical and dynamic. They illuminate the operations of psychic forces within and upon the experiences and ultimate destinies of man—among men.

I have mentioned Schnitzler, the friend and contemporary of Freud.

Two of his works are, to my mind, superb illustrations of what I have in mind. One is the play *Reigen*, the other his novel *Frau Beate und ihr Sohn*. The first is a kaleidoscopic *ronde* of erotic communion—between a number of pairs, each one of whom has shared the partner of another coupling. This superb work contains a minimum of prurience and of salaciousness, but it does profoundly portray how Eros is conditioned in the settings of varying interpersonal relations. *Frau Beate und ihr Sohn* deals with the motif of unconscious incest, but in such wise as to transfix one's soul with the humility of deep wonderment.

The other playwright that comes to my mind, as it must also to yours, is our own Eugene O'Neill, and among his many and truly great plays the one that I feel best bears on our theme is his *Emperor Jones*.

It is not possible to cite other illustrative and supportive authors and playwrights. Beside there has been published a good book, badly named *Freud on Broadway*, which deals with this subject broadly and competently. I'll merely call this book in witness and stop there.

Of literary criticism, biography, and autobiography, there is no need to say much. You will recall, I am sure, the rash of debunking biographies which first appeared in the 'twenties, and which remained "in style" for a decade or more. These were, so to say, only weakly Freudian. They were rather reactive to the "stuffed shirt" patterns of the earlier biographers. But how deeply the writing of biography—in this instance autobiography—has been affected by Freud, one can perceive in that composed by Stanley Hall, who brought Freud to the United States in 1909, and in the other, written lately by my good friend Norbert Wiener.

I am aware that I have treated these items somewhat gingerly, but that is because I want to devote what little time is left me to the subject of *the vernaculars*. Vernacular is the term applied to a regional language. But it has a second meaning, of which the one I cited is derivative. It also means non-classical. The advent of the vulgar tongues, e.g., French, Italian, Spanish,—vulgar because they are not Latin or Greek—unbridled the intellectual and artistic potentialities of man. For all their glories, the classic tongues in time hobbled man's spirit, hedged in his creativity, and constrained his inventiveness. Since then every new vernacular, every new communication medium, has contributed to the greater growth and the more ample enrichment of the human mind and spirit. But while originally the vernaculars were only vulgar tongues,

that is language in the pristine sense, they have since grown in variety. Thus there are new vernaculars in mathematics, in logic, in painting, in poetry, indeed in all the modalities of communication. You need but think of the motion picture, television, and most significantly of the animated cartoon, to perceive at once both the meaning and the enormous creativity of the new vernacular. And to these developments—by indirection—Freud contributed greatly and profoundly. Was it not Freud who challenged the naive objectivity and the plain rationalism of the nineteenth century? Did he not above all others reveal to us the function of the symbol? Well then, if the word stands but for the symbol, why not expound and expand the symbol in the word, and thereby come closer to indwelling meaning. The poet always endeavored to attain to indwelling meaning, hence his poetic license. His license is broader now since the time of Freud: witness in T. S. Eliot, E. E. Cummings, and Gertrude Stein. Schnitzler in *Fräulein Else*, and Joyce in *Ulysses* employed a new vernacular, that of the stream of consciousness. Patently this is related to, if not a direct derivative of, the Freudian “free association.” O’Neill in several of his plays made his characters to speak out, and to experience, their repressed and unconscious thoughts and feelings. This, too, is in the nature of “a new vernacular.” But it is in the graphic arts that we witness most clearly the enfranchising, emancipating, influences of Freud’s emphasis on the symbolizing articulatedness of the psyche. The “humble contraption,” the *mobile*, is in effect the limpid, animated, embodiment of the artists’ hoary doctrines of masses, proportions, and relations. It is a multi-dimensional, shimmering exposition of the theory and philosophy of art that lies entombed in scores of musty volumes. The “mobile” is Freudian in spirit and speaks in eloquent witness of his impact on both painting and sculpture. The pointelist painters, the Impressionists, the painters and sculptors of abstractions, and the Surrealists, are and have been creating new vernaculars, and thereby enriching the human psyche, and enlarging the dimensions of our cultural life. It matters little whether what they produce is Art—by your or my definition. Bethink ye rather that even Shakespeare babbled in his infancy. Nor should you misread the meaning of my words. I know that the Impressionists predate Freud, even as did Schnitzler’s *Anatol*. I am certain that neither Chagall nor Dali drew their inspiration from Freud. And I am persuaded that Freud, who surrounded himself with Egyptian, Etruscan, and Roman antiquities, was

not partial to modernity in Art. But all this is really beside the point. Freud was not merely Freud, he was the embodiment, the realization, the exponential force of a transcending movement, "whose waves came awash upon the many shores." The impact of Freud upon Culture is akin to that of Darwin upon Science—no discipline remains unaffected by the concept of evolution.

And now comes my final salvo! I am persuaded that the philosophy of Existentialism shares the Freudian vision of being and experience. Existentialism is a loosely used *label*. It is affixed, to my mind, in gross error, to a good deal of degenerate and morbid literature. It is perverted by a coterie of craven and defeated souls, into a philosophy of swinish hedonism, and desperate permissiveness. It is not any of this that I refer to as Existentialism. I have in mind rather the works of Kierkegaard, of Heidegger, of Jaspers, and of Husserl. I mean that most illuminating treatment of the problem of "meaning and experience," of "purpose and achievement," the answer proffered by Existentialism to the vulgar query—"Of what good is life anyway?"

In Existentialism I perceive this answer, that "goodness apart from the experience" is a sham concept and a false query. The warrant for being lies in being, the meaning of existence is realized and achieved in existing. Freud too expounded this philosophy in his *Metapsychology*. It is embraced in his juxtaposition of Eros and Thanatos—in what he termed the life instinct and the death instinct.

Here I come to the end of my exposition *about* The Influence of Freud on Contemporary Culture, and a discomfiting suspicion dawns upon me. In that last analysis I fear me that quite like Thomas Mann, but more unwittingly, I have talked less about my subject and more about myself—that is, about my nodding acquaintance with Culture.